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By RICHARD STEIER

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His being scorned by both rank-and-file Firefighters and the union board he left behind was rooted originally in his decision while UFA president to have his members take on medical duties, and his getting them what they considered a miserly \$1,400 a year for doing so. His explanations for both actions are logical: requiring them to respond to medical emergencies gave his members added value in a city where structural fires had begun a decline that has continued, and he had limited bargaining leverage on compensation due to an unwise rejection of a 1989 contract by UFA delegates at a time when Mr. Von Essen was a member of the union's board.

That hasn't mattered to the union presidents who followed him.

He has also shouldered some of the blame for the Giuliani administration's failure in 2001 to find a substitute after the digital radios obtained by the department encountered communications problems during a Queens basement fire that March. Instead, while Mr. Giuliani and then-City Comptroller Alan Hevesi feuded over whether the faulty radios were purchased in bulk because of favoritism (they were, but the misconduct involved a mid-level aide rather than Mr. Giuliani), the department returned to the analog radios which had transmission problems during the response to the first World Trade Center bombing in February 1993.

When they were deployed on 9/11 inside the complex, similar

radio-communication failures occurred and were a contributing factor in the deaths of 121 firefighters inside the North Tower of the Trade Center, in contrast to police officers whose clear radio transmissions allowed them to evacuate before the building collapsed. Added Mark Against Him

Mr. Von Essen was among those blamed by the UFA and its rank and file for not getting upgraded radios to them in time; one legitimate criticism was that the FDNY never consulted, as it was contractually required to do, with the fire unions before signing off on the defective Motorola digital radios.

In a Feb. 9 phone interview, seven weeks after he retired from his position as Administrator of Region 2 of the Federal Emergency Management Agency—covering New York, New Jersey, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands—he said, “I think about Sept. 11 probably every day. I’ve been told by medical folks that I’m lucky I can compartmentalize things. I didn’t lose any family members, but I lost hundreds of folks that I really cared about.”

For much of his tenure at FEMA during the Trump Administration, Mr. Von Essen’s primary focus was hurricanes and other natural disasters in Puerto Rico. That abruptly changed a year ago when Region 2 was tapped to play a pivotal role in the Federal Government’s response to the coronavirus.

“The biggest problem we had was getting folks the equipment they needed—the personal protective equipment, the drugs, the ventilators,” he said. “FEMA did a terrific job considering how much was unavailable on the market.”

Asked whether he thought Mr. Trump should have invoked the Defense Production Act to a greater degree to get more of the

necessary materials manufactured quickly, Mr. Von Essen said, “Yeah. I figured if it made sense, they would do it.” But on the other hand, he noted, FEMA wound up with far more ventilators than were needed once medical professionals discovered that except in cases where patients would have died otherwise, they did more harm than good. Difference in Perspective

“COVID was probably the hardest and worst experience New York City has gone through—those first four or five months,” he continued. “But for me and the Fire Department, Sept. 11 was worse.”

In an interview with WCBS-radio that aired the day he retired, shortly before Christmas, Mr. Von Essen called his 32-plus years in the FDNY “the greatest job I ever had, but with the worst ending I ever had... because of the grief. There was no way of telling that mother or father, wife, family member. You couldn’t give them what they wanted.”

Referring to Mr. Giuliani’s decision to keep missing firefighters on the clock until their bodies or remains were found, boosting their retirement allowances, the ex-Fire Commissioner told WCBS, “We tried extra pension benefits—it was millions of dollars given to families and loved ones. But we couldn’t give them what they wanted: their husband or son.”

At one point shortly after the 343 FDNY members were lost during the rescue attempts, Mr. Von Essen raised hackles by saying that amid all their grief, firefighters had to “suck it up” and keep doing their jobs. It was language the ex-Bronx Firefighter thought his troops would understand, but nerves were raw enough that it became one more thing that would be held against him by his

critics within the ranks.

He said he regularly attends the main 9/11 memorial ceremony in lower Manhattan, as well as the private one held that day at FDNY headquarters in Brooklyn, but as to attending other department events, he said he did that “less and less because many of the guys I knew have retired.”

He continued, “I’m still in contact with 6 or 7 widows [of those who died during the Sept. 11 rescue efforts] pretty regularly. We commiserate, laugh and cry.” Estranged From Old Union

Regarding the UFA, he said, “It has been pretty much a permanent estrangement. Cassidy was the only guy who reached out to me,” usually seeking information on benefits Mr. Von Essen or his predecessors as union president had been able to obtain.

He was referring to Steve Cassidy, the one former UFA president against whom the “turncoat” provision’s penalties were invoked when he stepped down after 14 years in the job to become Executive Director of the Fire Pension Fund in 2016. The fractiousness that has long rippled through the union can be seen in the contrast with the response the previous decade when Tony Garvey retired as president of the NYPD Lieutenants Benevolent Association to serve the same role at the Police Pension Fund: police unions applauded the move.

While Mr. Garvey was affable and Mr. Cassidy could be abrasive, both men had spent years familiarizing themselves with pension-system operations rather than having subordinates represent them on the boards of their respective funds. The inclination of UFA board members— often feeling the heat from the rank and file—to suspect the motives of their presidents was something Mr. Von

Essen knew all too well, having run the union at a time when it was rare for its presidents to be re-elected.

The decisions that soured his standing within the UFA, particularly after he left to become Mr. Giuliani's Fire Commissioner in 1996, stemmed from actions taken under the two previous Mayors.

In 1989, a year after then-Mayor Ed Koch signed off on a complicated contract deal with the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association that significantly improved pay and benefits for cops but at the expense of future hires, then-UFA President Nicholas Mancuso reached similar terms but was required to make larger concessions because lower turnover among Firefighters than Police Officers reduced the city's savings on cuts in the pay scale for new members.

Arbitration Pitfall

Mr. Mancuso agreed to those terms because the alternative—going to arbitration—would have left key union rights vulnerable to being knocked out of its existing contract under a portion of the process known as scope of bargaining. Delegates overwhelmingly rejected the contract, however, and in the arbitration that followed, the UFA lost several key rights, one of them governing staffing requirements.

The second blow to the union came midway through the tenure of Mayor David Dinkins, when a budget crunch led him to close a Bronx firehouse as part of a citywide savings program.

Mr. Von Essen, who was elected UFA president in 1993, a few months before Mr. Giuliani captured the mayoralty, gave him the union's endorsement partly because of his commitment to reopen the closed firehouse. But he understood that the continued drop in

structural fires made closing firehouses an easy target for outside watchdogs, and knew that a future Mayor might be willing to eliminate them while cutting Firefighter staffing.

So even as Mr. Giuliani prepared to transfer EMS from the old Health and Hospitals Corporation to the FDNY, Mr. Von Essen was willing to have Firefighters assist on medical calls by having those assigned to engine companies be trained in basic-life-support duties. He knew some Firefighters had emergency medical training but rarely used it once hired by the FDNY, and he was convinced that having engine companies respond to medical emergencies would insulate the department against firehouse cuts if the downward trend in building fires continued. Old Pact Killed Leverage

When it came time to negotiate added pay for his members in return for the extra duty, Mr. Von Essen was hamstrung by the arbitration ruling a half-dozen years earlier. In addition to having the staffing guarantee eliminated during the scope proceedings, the UFA also had a written description of Firefighter job duties eliminated from its contract.

Without that description, the union couldn't have refused the medical role if Mr. Von Essen had wanted to in the face of grumbling by some members that they signed on strictly to fight fires. This also meant the city had all the leverage in bargaining how much they would be paid to take on medical calls, and he settled for a \$1,400 differential.

But notwithstanding the hard feelings at the time, which increased exponentially when he agreed in 1996 to become Fire Commissioner after Howard Safir moved over from the FDNY to

succeed William J. Bratton as Police Commissioner, Mr. Von Essen said that by now his wisdom in embracing medical duties should be obvious to his old union.

Regarding the “turncoat clause” being a stigma that is still associated with him, he said, “It’s kind of sad not to understand that it was my work both at the UFA and as Commissioner that is the reason for so much of the training, so much of the benefits [Firefighters] have today. I never changed my desire to help them. It’s just when you’re Fire Commissioner, you’ve got to think about the city’s eight million people, not just the Firefighters.”

He continued, “If anyone looks back honestly, 25 years after we merged [with EMS], [Firefighters] would have to admit that they’re much better off because of that move and the additional duties they took on. The only people who haven’t benefitted as much as they should have are the EMTs and paramedics from EMS. The Firefighters have gained excellent medical [skills] and justified keeping firehouses open and keeping staffing as high as it is.” (Mr. Cassidy, as part of his last contract as UFA president, early in the de Blasio administration won back a third of the staffing rights for engine companies that had been lost in the old arbitration, which was later used by Mayor Michael Bloomberg to eliminate the fifth Firefighter at 60 companies.

EMS Gets Short End

The firefighting side of the department also benefited from the EMS consolidation resulting in a special promotion exam for EMTs to gain hiring priority for Firefighter jobs, since this has led to a significant boost in the number of people of color in a force that as recently as 20 years ago was still more than 90-percent white.

Conversely, that lateral transfer has made it increasingly difficult for EMS to attract and retain quality personnel, since a gap of roughly \$35,000 in maximum salary between EMTs and Firefighters leads to an average of 300 EMTs a year moving into Firefighter jobs.

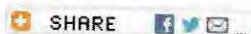
Mr. Von Essen chided Mayor de Blasio for not doing more to address the pay gap, saying, "It's not going to happen in one contract that they'll get to parity. But there's lots of ways to get creative and help out EMS. Do something right—they're still second-class citizens in the department after 25 years."

At age 75, he is not ready to retire, and he said sometime in the future he would like to find consulting work similar to what he did in between being an executive at Giuliani Partners and his time at FEMA: he worked for Honeywell and Underwriters Laboratories, focusing on getting emergency workers the best communications equipment.

Concern for Rudy

On the positive side, he left the Federal Government in much better shape than his old boss, who as Mr. Trump's personal lawyer is reportedly the target of a Justice Department investigation into his work in the Ukraine trying to dig up embarrassing material about Joe Biden, and has further tarnished his reputation aiding the then-President's efforts to overturn the election results.

"I really hope that Mayor Giuliani comes through all this," Mr. Von Essen said with surprising formality. "It seems that everybody who has gotten involved with President Trump has suffered for it. I really hope he comes out of it OK."



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SECOND GO-ROUND AT TRADE CENTER ENDED BETTER:
Former Fire Commissioner Tom Von Essen, photographed a year ago outside the New York offices of the Federal Emergency Management Agency in the new World Trade Center complex, left the job in late December and looks back now on 9/11, the failure of the city to close a large pay gap between Firefighters and Emergency Medical Technicians, and the tribulations of old boss Rudy Giuliani, noting, 'It seems like everybody who has gotten involved with President Trump has suffered for it.'

The Chief-Leader/Rebecca White

